Digital Storytelling Around the World

John Hartley, QUT

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1. DST

Everyone loves a story. Not everyone loves – or even knows – a computer.

'Digital storytelling' is a workshop-based practice in which 'ordinary' people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives.

The idea is that this puts the universal human delight in narrative and self expression into the hands of everyone in the digital age; and potentially brings individual experience, ideas, creativity and imagination to the attention of the whole world. It gives a voice to the myriad tales of everyday life as experienced by ordinary people in their own terms. Despite its use of the latest technologies, its purpose is simple and human.

Dana Atchley invented the form of digital storytelling we're discussing today in California in the early-to-mid 1990s, working Joe Lambert, who has carried on the movement after Atchley died in 2000.

Although digital video existed before that time in various forms, it were overwhelmingly the productions of experts – mostly digital artists and filmmakers. Atchley's innovation was to develop an exportable workshop-based approach to teach 'ordinary' people—from school students to the elderly, with or (usually) without knowledge of computers or media production—how to produce their own personal videos.

But despite the term 'digital' in digital storytelling, the emphasis is on the *story* and the *telling*. Workshops typically commence with narrative and expressive 'limbering up' exercises, designed to loosen up everyone's storytelling capabilities. This feature is called the *story circle* (which is the title of a recent book on the topic, which features chapters by Jean Burgess and me).

The story circle may include verbal games, making lists (loves and hates), writing make-believe scenarios, as well as scripting what will become each person's own story. The idea is not only to tap into people's implicit narrative skills, but also to focus on the telling, by prompting participants to share their ideas, and to do so spontaneously, quickly, and in relation to all sorts of nonsense as well as the matter at hand.

Thus, although individual stories can often be confessional, moving, and express troubles as well as triumphs, the process of making them can be noisy, fun and convivial.

While the practice developed as a response to the exclusion of 'ordinary' people's stories in broadcast media, it was facilitated by the increasing accessibility of digital media to home users, with digital cameras, scanners, and personal computers all becoming increasingly accessible to the domestic market in the 1990s.

Digital storytelling emerged as part of broader cultural shifts, including a profound change in models of media communication. As contemporary societies shift from manufacturing industry to knowledge-based service economies, the entire array of large-scale and society-wide communication is undergoing a kind of paradigm shift, across the range of entertainment, business and citizenship.

Changing technologies and consumer demographics are transforming the production and consumption of media content of all kinds. The one-way broadcasting model of traditional media industries is evolving into peer-to-peer communication networks. These changes have been most pronounced in the explosion of user-created content in digital media from games to online social networks.

Similar changes are also being recognised in academic agendas, with interest shifting beyond analyses of the political economy of large-scale practices, or the ideology of industrially produced texts, and towards consumer-generated content production, distribution, and consumption.

Digital storytelling adds to the familiar social networking sites (YouTube, Facebook) a focus on individual imaginative vision, a 'poetics' of expression and the necessary technical competence, offering people a repertoire of creative skills to enable them to tell their own unique stories in a way that captures the imagination of others – whether close family members or the whole world.

At this moment in media history, digital storytelling is at once an emergent form, a new media practice, an activist/community movement, and a textual system:

- As a *form*, it combines the direct, emotional charge of confessional disclosure, the authenticity of the documentary, and the simple elegance of the format – it is a digital sonnet, or haiku.
- As a *practice*, digital storytelling combines tuition of the individual with new narrative devices for multiplatform digital publishing across hybrid sites.
- As a *movement*, it represents one of the first genuine amalgamations of expert and consumer/user-led creativity.
- And as an elaborated *textual system* created for the new media ecology, digital storytelling challenges the traditional distinction between professional and amateur production, reworking the producer/consumer relationship. It is a contribution to (and test of) contemporary thinking about 'digital literacy' and participation, storytelling formats, and content distribution.

Digital storytelling has certainly travelled the world, and it remains a powerful tool for both emancipationist and instrumentalist agendas.

However, given the speed of technological and social change in the online environment, it must adapt in order to survive. Although it developed in the context of Californian festival culture and European public broadcasting, it has matured in the age of YouTube.

Is it possible to retain the celebratory, affirmative, confessional and therapeutic 'romanticism' of digital storytelling within a global structure of socially networked entrepreneurial consumerism? Is it possible for teachers to be facilitators, or will their best efforts go towards reproducing organisational inequalities, further disempowering the disenfranchised voices they were trying to hear?

The only way to resolve such questions is in practice. Digital storytelling is organised around workshop practices and teaching programs that bring big organisations and expert professionals into skin-to-skin contact with 'ordinary citizens.'

Instead of leaving things as it finds them (like much academic research), it is an interfering attempt to propagate the means for digital expression, communication, interaction and social networking to the whole population. The hope is that all sides get something valuable from the experience and perhaps a more permanent value-add to take away and keep.

None of this is easy to do without creating further problems. Thus diversity, experimentation, flexibility and openness to change are more likely to produce valuable outcomes than fixed rules, mere indifference, or critical disengagement.

However it is clear that critical observers entertain various misgivings about digital storytelling, including:

- as a *form*, it is too sentimental, individualistic, and naively unselfconscious;
- as a *practice*, the means of delivery are too teacher-centric, too caught up in institutional powers and structures;
- as a *movement*, its propagation and dissemination strategies are hopeless – most digital stories persist only as unused archive; and it is very low-profile on the net, making little use of interactivity and social networking;
- as a *textual system*, the potential for 'serious' work is underdeveloped – there is too much attention to self-expression; not enough to the growth of knowledge.

These misgivings (see Lundby, ed, 2009; and Hartley & McWilliam, eds, 2009) need to be seen as a spur to action. Digital storytelling is an experiment; it needs iterative self-correction and improvement.

2. QUT

It is this spirit that we have embarked on a long-term program of research, teaching and practice in digital storytelling at QUT.

We began by inviting Daniel Meadows to come to Australia and 'train the trainers' – creating an early group of facilitators – Jean Burgess among them – who were interested in digital storytelling as a movement and as a tool for their own work.

Since then we have employed digital storytelling in numerous research projects, teaching programs (for instance we run a workshop for postgraduates students every year, which Burcu Simsek took), and we have also partnered with many external agencies to produce digital stories

Our first major research project to employ the technique was called YIRN: the Youth Internet Radio Network. This was in 2004-5, before YouTube was even launched. The idea was to explore how digital media could be used to stimulate creative expression and sharing among regional and remote youth in Queensland.

We were especially interested in groups that were socially excluded in one way or another – for instance Indigenous people, people of low socio-economic status, marginalised identities, or people without access to the creative stimulus taken for granted in the city.

The two-year project took digital storytelling all over the state of Queensland – partly by means of a special 'Innovation Train' that toured the regions. We will see an example shortly – a story made by a young Aboriginal girl, Latifah Simpson.

YIRN was a 'proof of concept' experiment, useful to our research centre as a means for us to understand how technologies, workshops, and users can interact to produce something valuable for all participants.

Subsequently, we have expanded our horizons to include external partners from, for instance:

- State Government,
- health authorities (e.g. digital storytelling for senior citizens and for intergenerational communication),
- oral history projects in the urban environment,
- State Library of Queensland,
- Queensland Museum.

Other projects have deployed digital storytelling for:

- community arts,
- development communication – including some ambitious projects in South Asia run by our colleague Prof. Jo Tacchi
- the empowerment of marginal groups and
- advocacy organisations.

Thus, digital storytelling has found its niche among community development, community arts, and regional festival cultures. It's not so much a technological affordance as a civic or social movement.

Although the 'basic proposition' of digital storytelling is the personal story, this does not need to be confined to questions of identity, personal empowerment, or therapeutic 'confessional' redemption. At QUT we have been keen to experiment with digital storytelling as part of more impersonal goals, while retaining the essential personal element.

Thus, we have been working with cultural institutions.

For instance, for the State Library Jean Burgess facilitated a workshop in which prominent people from Government and the Indigenous community recorded their responses to the Australian Government's decision to say 'Sorry' to Aboriginal people in 2007. Such responses are obviously both political and personal at the same time, and can be used for reconciliation purposes among communities that don't know enough about each other, least of all on the human scale.

Another example is the use of digital storytelling for scientific purposes. Thus, digital storytelling can be used by museum or gallery curators to showcase a favourite artefact from their collections. We will show you an example made as part of a Queensland Museum project called 'Wild Backyards.' Various people literally brought home the larger problems

of environmental sustainability, bio-diversity, and ecological conservation by describing the wildlife to be found and encouraged in their own suburban backyards.

The last example we will show you relates to another project undertaken by Jean, again for the Queensland Museum, featuring stories of refugee experience. This is a contentious and divisive issue in Australia for political reasons. But this project explored the human dimension. Jat (a.k.a Etienne) tells his 'Journey of Understanding' in a way that commands a friendly and welcoming response.

Before I finish I'd like to mention briefly how digital stories can enjoy a 'second life' when they are used again after they have been made.

Thus, Latifah Simpson's story from the Aboriginal Community of Cherbourg was subsequently translated into Mandarin as part of an exchange package between her school in regional Queensland and a school in Fanchong, Anhui, one of China's poorest provinces. The children exchanged stories about themselves, and for the first time Aboriginal kids were able to relate directly to kids of their own age in a different country – who, despite Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, were worse off than themselves. The response of Cherbourg School was to send over another package to Fanchong: a package of sports equipment, including footballs so the Chinese kids could play 'Aussie Rules' footy.

Similarly, Jat's refugee story was used in Australian schools to increase awareness of multicultural values. And the 'Wild Backyards' stories featured in the educational package of Queensland Museum's online services.

What makes all of these 'uses of digital storytelling' unique is the participation on non-expert and often disadvantaged people in the representation of issues where they rarely gain a voice.

It is clear from the stories that they don't see themselves as victims: on the contrary, they show optimism, expertise, and confidence in a future they want to make for themselves.

Thus, digital storytelling has important implications for the overall theme of this conference: 'Social Transformation.' Transformation can't be imposed by bureaucratic control or technological fix. It has to start *socially* – and people are their own best experts on what needs to be transformed.

Now we will show you three of our QUT stories, and I'll hand over to Dr Burgess to discuss the practical problems involved in the process itself. After her, Burcu Simsek will introduce her own research project and experimental work in introducing digital storytelling to Turkey.

Video:

- Latifah Simpson (Cherbourg, QUT-YIRN)
- Sybil Curtis (Wild Backyards, QUT-QM)
- Jat (Journal of Understanding, QUT-QM)